

## **Village Center Revitalization**

### **Long Reach Village Center Listening Session**

#### **May 20, 2008 Session Notes**

These meeting notes provide an overview of the presentation and meeting discussion. Comments are organized by topic, rather than arranged in the order that they were made.

### **Introduction**

Mina Hilsenrath and Tom Sprenkle of the Department of Planning and Zoning, and Ian Kennedy, Special Assistant to the County Executive, were present at Long Reach's Village Board meeting on May 20, 2008. Mina Hilsenrath opened the listening session with the Village Board and Village Manager, and an open discussion ensued.

### **Village Discussion**

#### **What works well?**

The Village Board unanimously stated that Long Reach is the best located of the Columbia village centers, because it is located on Tamar Drive and near major retail centers on Snowden River Parkway, Route 175, Columbia Gateway, and along Route 100. With the right partner, the village center could compliment these retailers.

#### **What might be changed?**

The Village Board was concerned that Cedar Properties has shown little interest in improving the center. The Property owner has rejected overtures on behalf of the Village Board to host events at the center. The general sentiment is that Cedar Properties doesn't fully understand the role of the village center as a neighborhood gathering place.

The Board also felt that the Safeway at Long Reach is not one of the better Safeway supermarkets in the area. People frequently go to the Long Gate Safeway, which is much larger and has a superior range of produce and goods. Consequently, the Long Reach Safeway has deteriorated in quality. Smaller businesses catering to the lower end of the retail market have opened in the center, contributing to its general decline. Long Reach can afford to support a selection of higher caliber tenants in the village center. The Board also felt that another weakness of Long Reach was poor perception of public safety, and also that it isn't the most physically attractive center. The Board wanted Long Reach to retain higher caliber services, to create a positive and safe environment. It was believed that due to its location, Long Reach should offer successful local retail, such as dry cleaners and a better supermarket, to reinforce the role of the village center, and to compliment, not directly compete, with the surrounding big-box retail.

There are offices that occupy the second floor of the village center, but they lack an elevator and the general condition of the offices have declined over the years.

Some members of the Board stated that the concept of the village centers may be past their peak for what they were designed for, and the centers need to evolve to reflect changing consumer habits. The village centers may need more than just a face-lift, and may benefit from a renewed concept of a community gathering place. Not every village center is going to be able to have a supermarket or the same range of retail. The future may be in a series of different, distinct, village centers, each with its own offerings. Each village center could be themed as a destination. For example, Oakland Mills village center could be a restaurant village center with a series of restaurants featuring different cuisines.

The Columbia Arts Center is housed at Long Reach, yet the Board felt that there was little relationship between the arts center and Stonehouse and the Long Reach community. The Board mentioned that it could work harder at trying to sponsor events in conjunction with the arts center.

### **What should be the Process for Village Center Revitalization?**

The Village Board asked about the scope of possible changes. Mina Hilsenrath explained Howard Research and Development's (HRD) gatekeeper role and that the current zoning process doesn't address revitalization. The Board agreed that a gatekeeper was necessary, and that perhaps New Town Zoning could be amended to allow greater community participation in the process. The Board suggested that a master plan was needed, or at least a conceptual master plan that outlined ideas for all the village centers, and which detailed housing allocations, if any. The village centers master plan should also tie the centers to Downtown, and reflect the contextual relationship between all the village centers.

Having design guidelines was supported by the Board, stating that expert advice would be helpful; however, design standards should not be so strict as to be a disincentive to prospective businesses.

### **What Land Uses Might be Appropriate in the Village Center?**

The Board agreed that people appreciate the Village Center not just as shops but as a gathering place. Starbucks, for example, would be a good draw for the Village Center and enhance its role as a gathering place. The new Rita's at Harper's Choice almost instantly changed the tone of that particular village center, so it's possible that one or two significant merchants could act as a catalyst for change. Stonehouse is already a "happening" place on Saturday mornings that draws families with young children, yet the village center doesn't take advantage of it.

Some people supported the idea of introducing housing, particularly mixed use housing to the village center. However, others felt that introducing housing is trading one set of problems for another and that adding new residential units doesn't necessarily translate into more life for the center. The Board felt that the center is outdated and should be remodeled with a better physical design and connections.

